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Robert Burns:
The Ploughman Poet in No Man´s Land

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Resumo

Considered by some critics and scholars as one of the pioneers of the Romantic movement in Britain, others, however, have failed to acknowledge this writer's contribution as a romantic poet leaving him in no man's land. A quarter of a millennium after his birth, Scottish poet Robert Burns, 'the man of independent mind', is still struggling to find his space in the literary canon.

Was Robert Burns born in the wrong place at the wrong time as to be eligible for the label of romantic poet within the British tradition? If that was the case, did his work belong to a Scottish tradition whose distinctive aesthetic features would have discarded his poetry from fully fitting in the Romantic movement in Britain despite some conspicuous similarities? This dissertation will aim to find a plausible answer to these questions by looking into relevant socio-political aspects, personal experiences and literary influences that might have helped shape Burns's style, and which would ultimately allow to determine to what extent his poetic production complies with the Romantic canon.

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Romantic manifesto *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800) as a major exponent of formal, aesthetic and ideological aspects pertaining to Romantic poetry will be the framework of my analysis in order to assess the romantic quality of Burns's selected poetic work, while *The Bard* (2009), Professor Robert Crawford's comprehensive biography on Robert Burns, will serve as the starting point to comprehend the complexity of the ploughman poet and his time.

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To Angus

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Introduction

January 25th 1997: a date I will not be likely to forget. The very first time I set foot in Edinburgh ready to start a working experience on the Western Isles was anything but an uneventful day. Little did I guess that I had landed in Edinburgh just on time for Burns Night celebrations, and that I should have known better than to book a place to stay. Of all the commotion around Robert Burns, or the lack of it in some cases, I must have been fully aware a year later when I finally managed to string more than two coherent sentences together. Since then, life got in the way, while Burns continued to be a total stranger, literarily speaking. Little did I know either that twenty-two years later I would eventually have the opportunity to dedicate some time to learn more about the Scottish bard who marked the beginning of an extraordinary life experience in a foreign land that became my second home.

A quarter of a millennium after his birth, however, Robert Burns still seems far from finding a resting place where to settle in the literary canon. While for some academics the ploughman poet would undoubtedly be considered as precursor of the Romantic movement in Britain, other critics oppose his inclusion in the British tradition, therefore discarding any possible links with English Romanticism. Indeed, it might have been the case that Burns did actually form part of a distinct Scottish literary school clearly disassociated from the English tradition, without losing sight, nevertheless, of the unique historical context of post-Union Britain. This dissertation aims at assessing the intriguing disparity of critical opinions relating to this question in an attempt to determine to what extent Burns's literary work may comply with the Romantic canon, and, in this way, be able to rescue the ploughman poet from no man's land.

Given the unprecedented socio-political conditions in mid-eighteenth century Scotland, along with the marked social character of most of Burn's literary work, *The*

Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography (2009), Professor Robert Crawford's comprehensive biography on Robert Burns, seemed an appropriate starting point for this work, which helped unveil relevant episodes in the ploughman poet's colourful life while establishing links with pertinent aspects in Burns's literary work, thus clearing the path to assess the poet's potential integration within the British tradition. Likewise, Chris Tabraham's *The Illustrated History of Scotland* (2017) along with other articles including related information have been also used as additional critical material to help interweave Burns's historical setting, forming connections with the subject matter as well as some underlying meanings of his poetry. Likewise, William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge's *de facto* Romantic manifesto "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), whose precepts have been employed pertinently throughout the dissertation, has served as theoretical framework to analyse the romantic quality of Burns's selected work where poetic voice, linguistic register and subject matter are concerned. Additionally, the study of the different literary views and approaches from academics such as Raymond Bentman, David Daiches and Murray Pittock has allowed for a more comprehensive examination of Burns's poetry, especially with respect to those literary influences which may have inspired the ploughman poet's work.

The corpus here examined encompasses some relevant fragments of Burns's poetic work, which have been employed with different purposes in mind. In this way, the selected extracts would aim at showing the connection between the historical context and the subject matter of Burns's poems, or at highlighting a particular relevant feature, while on other occasions these passages would be contrasted with other literary works or used to assess their compliance with the romantic precepts as postulated in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*. The selected corpus used throughout the dissertation is formed by "To a Mouse", "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie", "Poor Mailie's Elegy", "Holy

Willie's Prayer", "The Fornicator. A New Song", "The Cotter's Saturday Night", "Tam o'Shanter. A Tale", "To a Mountain Daisy", "The Lass o'Ballochmyle", "The Vision", "Man was Made to Mourn. A Dirge" and the "Preface" to *Poems, Chiefly Written in the Scottish Dialect* together with Wordsworth's brief fragments from "Lines Written in Early Spring" and "To the Daisy".

Despite the fact that this dissertation is structured in two major parts, I would like to think of them as a continuum rather than a division, the contents of both sections functioning as stepping stones helping lead the way that would allow to find Burns a suitable niche in the literary tradition.

Part one deals with all those aspects that seem to have shaped Burns not only as the rebellious person that he was, but also as the no less rebellious poet, hence my decision to link, whenever possible, his life experience with his literary work. After a brief introduction to Burns's historical background in post-Union Scotland, bearing in mind that other pertinent contextual elements will also spring up in part two, the focus would be on the ploughman poet's education in eighteenth-century rural Lowland Scotland, which might help shed some light on the claims about Burns's allegedly poor command of the English language, for some scholars a decisive factor when trying to relate his work to the British tradition. The following two sections would encompass religious and political influences that begin to unfold Burns's most unruly and radical, or, should we say, democratic facet, which would also be captured in his literary work, most importantly, in the use of the vernacular. The last section would introduce yet another surprising side to the ploughman poet: his chameleonic disposition and remarkable deceiving skills, both in life and in writing. Burns's complex personality, also mirrored in his work, did not seem to go unnoticed, and it was no long before reputed figures in

literary circles in Britain and beyond would start to acknowledge his work, which, once again, may question Burns's supposedly disassociation from the British tradition.

In part two, the wandering ploughman poet begins what seems to be an unavoidable journey to no man's land, each one of the sections covering a different angle to be considered, the first one being the compliance of Burns's work with the British tradition in which he seems to have fallen into a state of neglect. Burns's supposedly weak command of the English language, allegedly reflected in the bad quality of his "English" poems, appears to be one of the strongest arguments to justify such indifference, although not all scholars seem to agree in this respect. Some academics, on the other hand, would advocate for placing Burns in the Scottish tradition, to which the following section would be devoted. As straightforward as it may seem, the state of the Scottish literature in post-Union Britain was indeed far from being uncomplicated, to the point that some critics went as far as to question the existence of such a thing as a Scottish tradition. Nevertheless, Burns does appear to be influenced to a greater or lesser extent by his Scottish predecessors, especially in using the vernacular, which might suggest that the possibility of a Scottish tradition could still be viable after all. The third and final section introduces William Wordsworth as one of Burns's most illustrious and fervent admirers. The striking similarities which sometimes emerge when comparing the works of both authors, along with the likeness between the precepts postulated by Wordsworth and Coleridge in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and Burns's own "Preface" to *Poems, Chiefly Written in the Scottish Dialect* (1786) led some academics to deem Burns as the precursor of the Romantic movement in Britain. For other commentators, however, such similarities would have been merely coincidental leaving, yet again, the ploughman poet in literary limbo.

PART 1: THE MAKING OF A PLOUGHMAN POET

1.1. A Poet is Born

Village of Alloway, Ayrshire, Lowlands of Scotland, 1759: a poet is born in the midst of a significant moment in the history of Scotland, witness to crucial economic, social, political and cultural changes that would contribute to shape the rebellious personality and literary work of Robert Burns. The wheel of change for the nation had been put into motion long before 1759, the starting point dating as far back as 1603, when the Union of Crowns between Scotland and England materialised under the reign of James VI of Scotland, who would also become James I of England. Just over a century later, the Union of Parliaments in 1707 encountered a nation still anchored to medieval practices in rural areas, a society where peasants and city dwellers alike did not have much of a say in the running of a country infested with diseases and underdeveloped. For some, the Union meant a light at the end of the tunnel, a definite end for the House of Stewart and any successors of James VI; for others, it spelt disaster, and the great majority, however, probably did not care much (Tabraham 2017: 112, 127, 129, 130). In truth, the 1707 Union was nothing but the sequel of a long-term English hegemony, which, by then, had already become the norm for many Scots. Yet, even after the Union of Parliaments, the nation managed to preserve its own legislation, language and traditions, in such way that Britain came to be a divided whole (Davis 1998: 623), or as Colin Kidd quite graphically puts it, “a semi-detached appendage of the British state” (Kidd 1996: 364).

Having said all that, and despite certain indifference, some mixed feelings and a rather slow start after the Union, the scale of the development that came over Scotland in the years to come was such that in the short time between 1750-1780, its economic growth exceeded all expectations and surpassed the progress undergone in England over two

centuries. Much of this meteoric rise was owed to the age of "agricultural improvement", which meant the whole restructuring of feudal farming practices in Scotland, also coming hand in hand with the considerable growth in population, more acute in western areas, and the subsequent increase of food prices. This new state of affairs encouraged landowners to introduce long leases to their tenants, who, in turn, saw renewed opportunities on the land. These "improvement" farmers and landlords were keen and ready to apply innovative agricultural techniques that landed in England all the way from the Netherlands (Mitchison 2000: 345, 348, 349); among them was William Burnes, Robert Burns's father. William arrived in Ayrshire from the Northeast of Scotland decided to better himself and his family by becoming an "improver". William and his Ayrshire-born wife Agnes Broun raised a family of seven of whom Robert was the eldest, and tried their luck leasing two different farms in the area. William, a strict Calvinist and a highly reputed member of their local community, worked extremely hard to keep his farm afloat, but despite all the toil and best efforts, his ill-health and economic struggles would take him to his grave. He endured years of bitter litigation against landowner David MacClure; although he eventually won this battle, he died only two weeks later. Burns would inherit from him not only his flavour for agricultural improvement, but also his dignity and self-worth, despite their situation of dependency to landowners (Crawford 2009: 16, 28, 29, 49, 137; Daiches 1963: 1).

An added legacy would be Burns's radical nature, which also infected his poetry, rooted in the penuries of common folk, scapegoats of this new agrarian capitalism (Jonsson 2010: 218, 220). His compassion toward the predicament of mice, plants or dogs depicted in some of his poems seems to be a means to perceive the world from the point of view of those helpless and oppressed. In fact, Jonsson goes as far as to affirm that Burns's animal poetry "challenged the form of pastoral common to eighteenth-century

natural history" (2010: 220**).** Indeed, as opposed to the traditional idea of nature reaching a state of harmony with the help of human kind, Burns, in tune with some of the academics of the Enlightenment, presents a different vision. In his poem "To a Mouse", a defenceless little field mouse is threatened by man's plough, unveiling in this way the tyrannical nature of the world: "I'm truly sorry Man's dominion/Has broken Nature's social union" (Burns 1993: 67). Likewise, in "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie", written at the time of his father's illness, and based on the true story of a ewe that got entangled in rope and later died, the menacing act of man is yet again at the core of the animal's misfortune. Mailie becomes a talking-animal, her words echoing those of a parent at death's door concerned about what the future may hold for her lambs, reminiscing those same worries William Burnes had on his deathbed (Crawford 2009: 136). And just as "To a Mouse", Poor "Mailie's Elegy" will also deviate from previous traditional elegies (Bentman 1960: 161), which leaves us wondering about how far the innovative streak of the ploughman poet would actually reach, as well as to what extent his poetry fitted with the tradition of contemporary writers.

1.2. Education, education, education

Robert Burns was not only the son of a struggling tenant farmer, he also devoted the best part of his working life to labouring the land, which might have accounted for much of the public affection he received during his life time (Daiches 1963: 6). William Wordsworth, for instance, placed much of his admiration towards Burns on the grounds of his humble origins, considering him as an "average man of pastoral life" whose gift for poetry came in the form of simply natural inspiration (Fustich n.d.). Nevertheless, such spontaneity was inevitably accompanied by a number of detractors questioning his

adequate level of literacy when writing poems in English, which, in turn, may support the claims of those arguing against the connection of Burns's literary work with English literature (Bentman 1972: 213), and, by extension, with British Romanticism. His deficient use of English was indeed subject to much criticism which led to deem the rhyme of his English poems as "penury" and his expression "embarrassed" (Low 1974: 33). Such criticism may not sound totally out of place bearing in mind Burns's humble upbringing in eighteenth century rural Ayrshire, far away from the seat of the crown, and, more than likely, not quite the cradle of first-class education in Britain. However, against all odds, nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, as Chris Tabraham puts it, the age of Enlightenment "almost set the heather alight" (Tabraham 2017: 143). What once was thought to be an isolated, barbarous territory at the back of beyond, was now becoming the object of intellectual and artistic admiration from the rest of Europe, with names like David Hume, Adam Smith, James Watt or Thomas Telford leading this period of splendour. These men (for all the great advancements, women were not quite part of the picture yet) happened to be the extraordinary by-product of an education system based on the principle of universality with no other paragon in the rest of Europe (Tabraham 2017: 143). The application of educational Acts during the seventeenth century had guaranteed primary schools, high schools and universities in every parish, town and city respectively (Mitchison 2000: 330). While medieval Oxford and Cambridge continued to be the only two universities in mid-eighteenth-century England, Scotland had no less than five- Edinburgh, Glasgow, St Andrews and two colleges in Aberdeen. In fact, it was believed to have been the best educated country in the world (Tabraham 2017: 143).

The principle of universality certainly looks good on paper, but did small villages like Burns's native Alloway manage to take advantage of this privileged education system? In truth, the implementation of the legislation did not (and could not) reach every

household, given the inaccessibility of remote areas, especially those in the Highlands (Mitchison 2000: 251). The answer to the question of literacy may ultimately lie on religion. The western Lowlands held a reputation of being a breeding ground for extreme Calvinist fervour where spiritual values went hand in hand with devout reading of the Scriptures; not being able to read would be, therefore, considered humiliating and not acceptable (Brekke 2010: 80, 81). The opinionated disposition of Calvinist theology and its passionate sermons every Sunday advocated for the community to be participant, to such an extent that peasants acquired alongside all the necessary literacy skills, the ability to communicate beyond any social boundaries. Books would have been part of everyday life, even among the poorest, unveiling what appears to be quite a democratic society. Scottish peasantry would have been certainly more educated and less constrained with respect to freedom of speech than their neighbours in England (Mitchison 2000: 351, 355).

Consequently, while in other regions in Scotland literacy might have been debatable, in the west it spread to the lower classes to the point that many members of the community, as was the case with Robert Burns, were shown how to read at home before starting school (Brekke 2010: 80, 81). Farmer as well as church elder, William Burnes was also the author of *A Manual of Religious Belief* (1875) specially conceived for the tuition of his children (MacKay 2015). As it might be expected, pious William made sure that young Burns's education followed the strict religious precepts of Calvinism, encouraging him the reading of stories from the bible, which he would later cite on many occasions during his adult life (Crawford 2009: 34, 37). Aside from his father's instruction, Burns also benefitted from the services of John Murdoch, a young schoolteacher employed co-operatively by a group of local farmers (Daiches 1963: 13).

John Murdoch's comments on William Burnes begin to reveal certain attributes that lead to believe he was much more than an ordinary farmer pursuing the best for his children:

> "He spoke the English language with more propriety (both with respect to diction and pronunciation) than any man I ever knew, with no greater advantages. This had a very good effect on the boys, who began to talk and reason like men much sooner than their neighbours" (Crawford 2009: 37).

Despite not being able to attend high school or university, (Burns expressed his distrust toward college alleging he would have been compelled to turn away from his vernacular) (Crawford 2009: 52, 66), the ploughman poet learnt French and some Latin and studied astronomy, world geography and English grammar as part of his formal education. He was also acquainted with most of the major contemporary English authors, apart from Milton, Dryden and Shakespeare. In point of fact, his Anglocentric formal education had no room for Scottish literature, aside from folk songs and tales that he would have learnt from his mother (Daiches 1963: 13). Despite not being recognized by his first critics, Burns would show traces in his work of his reading of English writers such as Pope, Grey or Shenstone (Low 1972: 6), which, once more, makes us wonder not only to what extent Robert Burns's command of English could be considered below the par, but also to what point his literary work would have been detached from the British tradition.

1.3. Rebel without a Cause?

The truth is, the more one reads about Robert Burns, the more dispar and, sometimes, colourful depictions seem to surface around the ploughman poet's persona. Don Paterson (2010: 7) mentions the rather "complex" and somehow antithetical personality of a man

seen both as a womaniser and a fighter for women's rights, a humble farmer and a more refined and cosmopolitan citizen during his time in Edinburgh, an egalitarian and, yet, also someone willing to set off for the west Indies and be part of the colonizing enterprise. However, Paterson is perfectly unambiguous when affirming that Burns could have been many of those things, but never a 'heaven-taught ploughman'. In addition to his less than straight forward personality, Burns's resentment towards authority, partly as a result of his father's unfair treatment as a tenant farmer, also contributed to his radicalisation and his defiant attitude against what Paterson considers "all enemies of freedom" (2010: 7). Indeed, freedom, as Philip Butcher (1949: 16) remarks, consistently ruled Burns's life and poetry in such a way that, without explicitly expressing any sentiment of class oppression and subordination, he managed, nevertheless, to shout about social discrimination. Where religion is concerned, the Calvinist kirk also received its fair share of criticism in his poetry. In fact, Burns is thought to have been one of the most outspoken detractors of orthodox Presbyterianism in Scotland at that time.

Contrary to what might be assumed, G. Ross Roy indicates that Robert Burns was, by no means, 'anti-religious', but simply anti-hypocritical with respect to the most rigid factions of Calvinism. While new winds were blowing in the church from more moderate attitudes inspired by the Scottish Enlightenment, in the western Lowlands still many parishioners were reluctant to embrace this "new divinity", and deemed its churchmen heretics (Roy 1997: 99). This more benevolent body of clergy advocated for the relevance of ethical values and tolerance, which certainly suited Burns's character better (Brekke 2010: 79, 82). Such values were epitomised in the person of local Kirk minister William Dalrymple, whom much less liberal William Burnes also held in high regard. Dalrymple would play a salient role in shaping Burns's convictions and religious beliefs throughout his adult life, featuring in some of his poems as is "The Holy Tulzie"

(Crawford 2009: 32). Apart from his clear affinity with moderate Calvinism, Burns had more than enough reasons to rebel against the old clerical order after being accused twice of fornication, and suffering public penance in front of the whole congregation (Roy 1997: 99). The sin of fornication meant that males alongside their female partners in crime were to take the "seat of repentance" or "cutty stool", and be publicly reprimanded. Burns had to accept the punishment and pay his fine, but remained undeterred and proceeded by dedicating some celebratory verses to his sinful act as if it were a remarkable achievement. The poem in question, "The Fornicator. A New Song", was never published in Burns's lifetime, but it did spread among his local community:

Before the Congregation wide

I pass'd the muster fairly,

My handsome Betty by my side,

We gat our ditty rarely;

But my downcast eye by chance did spy

What made my lips to water,

Those limbs so clean where I ,between,

Commenc'd a Fornicator

(Burns 1993: 50)

In the end, Burns did not marry Elizabeth Paton, "Betsie" (Roy 1997:99; Crawford 2009: 168, 169).

Keeping in tune with his line of attack against Calvinist hypocrisy is Burns's poem "Holy Willie's Prayer", considered by David Daiches "the greatest of all satiric poems

and one of the great verse satires of all time" (Daiches 1994: 825). The character of Holy Willie, one of God's elects, embodies the idea of predestination fused with sexual desire, Willie being truly convinced that his lust is just a mere way for God to remind him he is a man in spite of his less than respectable behaviour (Daiches 1994: 826). In fact, Holy Willie seems to be no other than elder and local farmer William Fisher, Burns's neighbour and one of his friends' enemies, although Willie may also be interpreted as a representation Burns's promiscuity. In essence, this dramatic monologue, written, yet again, in vernacular, symbolises the Calvinist creed whereby those chosen for salvation would be spared from damnation, which ultimately translates, under Burns's own rendition, into a state of total immunity. This provocative interpretation meant a head-on attack against Calvinism, and set alarm bells ringing among kirkmen, who felt compelled to hold a series of meetings to determine the level of profanity of the poem. "Holy Willie", which was to be published posthumously, "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie", "To a Mouse" and "The Fornicator. A New Song" illustrate how Burns used the common life of his local rural community as source of inspiration for his poems, as well as a way to articulate his most inner feelings (Crawford 2009: 171, 173, 175, 177). Just as William Wordsworth payed tribute to Burns's linguistic spontaneity, the use of common life as an inspirational subject seems to be as entailed in their "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). One cannot but agree that "Holy Willie" has certainly the power to "make these incidents and situations interesting" (Wordsworth 1998: 357), if not controversial, "low and rustic life" (Wordsworth 1998: 357) being the primary source of inspiration for the ploughman poet. According to Walt Whitman, Burns appears to possess the ability to deal with nature, people or love in a simple manner, without artifice, which sets him apart from many contemporary poets (Whitman 1886: 431). Likewise, Burns avoids the depiction of "personifications of abstract ideas" (Wordsworth 1998: 359) and by his use of the

vernacular he also manages to "bring [his] language near to the real language of men" (Wordsworth 1998: 360). While his career as an occasional poet continued to develop, Burns progressively treated verse as a way to release his emotions with regard to social matters, love or the value of friendship, which, once more, seems to accord with the idea of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 1998: 358) postulated in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (Daiches 1963: 16). So far, it appears that the above selection of Burns's poems comply, at least on the surface, with some of the precepts put forward by Wordsworth and Coleridge in their manifesto. However, shouldn't we perhaps assert more accurately that the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* may have been influenced by Burns's poetic style as implied by Russell Noyes (1944: 830)? Even so, would this constitute enough evidence as to suggest that Burns's poetry could be, to some extent, related to the origins of the Romantic movement in England?

1.4. The "D" Word

Not only does Burns write about the community, but also for the community. His poetry and songs target a fairly large audience of common people, displaying his sympathy for those oppressed by ruthless landlords or subject to political or religious tyranny in a simple and straightforward manner. Far more than that, his writings encompass humanity as a whole regardless age or nationality, freedom being his true motivation, and "democracy" the word used by many when alluding to Burns's work (Butcher 1919: 265, 268; Whatley 2011: 656; Whitman 1885: 431). While his religious satires and other poems of social protest clearly unfold the poet's egalitarian principles, his true democratic spirit would be best epitomised by his political poems (Butcher 1919: 270), mirroring the tumultuous times that Europe and America were enduring in that era. In fact, as Scottish

writer and editor J.G. Lockhart states, Burns's literary contribution as a British, and, above all, a Scottish poet, could not have taken place at a better time, historically speaking (Low 1974: 343). Without losing sight of the French and American revolutions, Scotland was experiencing its own political transformation at that very same time (Whitman 1886: 427).

Just over half a century before the ploughman poet was born, the Union of Parliaments had received quite a hostile welcome in cities like Glasgow or Edinburgh, while the following years would be witness to a series of unsuccessful Jacobite risings in an attempt to restore the House of Stewart, and, along with this, the independence of Scotland. Eventually, it all ended in an overwhelming defeat in 1746 against the Hanoverian army at the battle of Culloden. Nevertheless, Jacobitism gave rise to a cultural and artistic movement driven by the idea of Scotland's heroic past as an independent country, James Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* (1773) fitting perfectly in this spirit of national ardour (Sher 2005: 157, 158, 161; Duncan, 2006). Burns could not help but feel proud of his Jacobite ancestors and the nostalgic memory of a free Scotland, despising all individuals who referred to Britain as England, as well as those Scots who behaved and spoke as if they were English. Burns's Jacobite streak, however, would have had more to do with patriotism than any political allegiance with the House of Stewart. Despite his strong sentiments, Burns knew better than to keep up appearances, especially after becoming an exciseman; publicly, however, he would pretend to show his support to the Hanoverian cause (Crawford 2009: 17, 306, 311, 323; Pittock 2008: 151). Therefore, Burns's usual display of a chameleonic behaviour presenting himself both as a fervent Scottish patriot in poems such as "The Cotter's Saturday Night", and as a citizen of Britain, when affirming "I am a Briton […] I am a man; and *the rights of human nature*

cannot be indifferent to me", appears to be a smoke screen to keep him out of trouble (Davies 1998: 623, 624; Butcher 1949: 268).

Evasions aside, Burns's controversial political views seemed to know no boundaries. His regard for the democratic aspirations of America anticipates those of William Blake, becoming the first European poet to be influenced by these ideals, and also the first one to include America in poetry in his song "A Fragment [Ballad on the American War]" while cleverly ensuring that the always dangerous word "democracy" was nowhere to be seen in his verses (Crawford 2009: 5, 146, 151). In spite of the economic loss that the American Revolution inflicted on the port town of Ayr, Burns's admiration for George Washington was such that he even dared to compare the American president to national hero William Wallace (Crawford 2009: 151). Likewise, his affinity with the original ideals of the French Revolution very nearly got him into serious trouble, when, shortly after the French king had been executed, he would write: "Lay the proud usurpers low! /Tyrants fall in every foe! /Liberty's in every blow, /Let us do or die!" (Harvie 2014: 137).

If this were not rebellious enough, provocative Burns would also go as far as to brand Louis XVI "a perjured Blockhead" and Marie Antoinette "an unprincipled prostitute" (Butcher 1949: 268). It should not come as a surprise then that Burns's political allegiances had been considered more radical than liberal under the scope of eighteenth-century standards, although no one knows exactly to what extent, since all the poems he thought overly controversial never actually saw the light (it is rumoured they were disposed of by his family after he died).

Nevertheless, what poems are left show that Burns remained in touch with his people and the relevant socio-political events of his country (Butcher 1949: 272). Sixty years after his death in 1796, Burns's democratic legacy had conveniently been appropriated by Whigs and Tories alike, taking advantage, so to speak, of the ambiguous nature of his

political position, as is the case in "The Cotter's Saturday Night". The poem depicts a humble rural family gathered at home in the evening while engaging in praying and reading the Scriptures. In the two final stanzas when a "*Virtuous populace*" (the peasantry) are exhorted to get to their feet and "stand a wall of fire around their much-lov'd ISLE,", while God is begged "never, never" to "Scotia's realm desert" (Burns 1993: 105) the poem unveils a patriotic sentiment appealing to both Scots and Britons alike. In addition, the idyllic rural scene evokes not only feelings of moral virtue and integrity, which would certainly suit the more conservative circles, but also introduces a striking contrast with mid-Victorian overcrowded Scottish cities, representing in this way the idea of a "lost Arcadia" sought after by more radical factions (Whatley 2011: 626, 647, 649). Even "Tory" Walter Scott, despite his condescending attitude towards "poor Burns", would profess his appreciation of Burns's poetic work, matching it with that of monarchic Shakespeare (Noyes, 1944: 832; Whitman 1886: 432), which seems to add yet more irony to the matter.

Less politically ambiguous, however, did Burns reveal himself in some of his songs. Inspired by the story of William Wallace, whom he truly admired, "Scots, wha hae" gave the bard an opportunity to sing about the Scottish fight for "Liberty & Independance"[sic] in times when it would have been too risky to speak out. In fact, Jacobite songs would frequently appear anonymously and even needed to be decoded (Crawford 2009: 368, 369; McGuirk 2014: 1). As much as Wordsworth praised the human side of Burns's poetry, he did not seem to hold "Scots, wha hae" (deemed by Victorian author Thomas Carlyle as "the noblest lyric in the language") in high regard, and dismissed it as "wretched stuff". In truth, Wordsworth objected to any kind of Scottish patriotic verse, his manifest disapproval extending to Burns's satiric verse, including the religious sort, which he found indecent and frivolous from a moral point of view (Low 1974: 131; Noyes

1944: 831, 832). Nevertheless, we ought to keep in mind that Burns's democratic spirit was not merely confined to political matters of more or less controversial content. As mentioned in previous lines, this attitude would also be displayed in the ploughman poet's preference for writing for and about his Ayrshire community in a language understood by common folk, the use of the vernacular becoming in such way a key ingredient in his pursuit of democracy. Nevertheless, was Burns's use of the vernacular what set him apart from other Scottish poets, what made him so unique? As a matter of fact, as Russell Noyes states, the use of vernacular responds to a clear influence from Burns's predecessors, among them Scottish poets Allan Ramsay (1686-1758) and, to a greater extent, Robert Fergusson (1750-1774) from whom Burns inherited "the real language of men". Likewise, both poets appear to form part of an uninterrupted four-hundred-year-old Scottish literary legacy (Noyes 1944: 830), which hints at the suggestion that Burns might have been participant of what seems to be an unmistakeable Scottish tradition.

1.5. Robert Burns, I Presume?

Just as the political ambiguity of "the Cotter's Saturday Night" illustrates the dual nature of Britain after 1707, it also mirrors Burns's own blurred personality and his ability to adopt different attitudes in his thirst for reaching all human beings (Davis 1998: 623; Paterson, 2010). But what do we know about Burns? So far, he has revealed himself as a political radical, a not so illiterate humble ploughman, an animal lover; Burns the promiscuous, the rebel against the most hypocritical aspects of the Calvinist doctrine, the democratic spirit. Who is the real Robert Burns? If, as Donald A. Low affirms, Burns's verses are not but a reflection of his life (1974: 349), it might certainly be worth looking into the individual hiding behind the poet. His brother Gilbert, the one person who knew

Burns better than anybody else, describes how the harsh circumstances on the farm, their father's illness and the continuous economic struggle caused emotionally volatile Burns great suffering, which translated into episodes of depression and also physical exhaustion due to strenuous labour. Poems composed at times of nervous breakdowns bear titles like "To Ruin" or "A Prayer in the Prospect of Death". Under these circumstances, reading and writing offered Burns the opportunity to let off steam and escape from bleak reality. And yet, at the same time, Gilbert points at his brother's ardent temperament and the rebellious behaviour of teenage Burns, whose passion for dancing and sexual promiscuity were not just mere forms of entertainment, but also a way to forge a personality diametrically opposed to that of his strict Calvinist father. Despite the differences between father and son, Burns always felt grateful for his upbringing, praising his father for his sense of dignity as well as his egalitarian principles, which Burns inherited and captured in his poetry (Crawford 2009: 59, 60, 79, 121, 139; Bentman 1972: 211).

It could be said that the real turning point in Burns's life and literary career came in the form of a review by lawyer and sentimental novelist Henry Mackenzie (1745-1841) in the Edinburgh periodical paper *The Lounger* in 1786. Mackenzie, author of *The Man of Feeling* (1771), which, incidentally, Burns held in high regard to the point of comparing it to the bible, was the first one to dub the Ayrshire poet the "heaven-taught ploughman" after the publication of Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786) in Kilmarnock. The title of MacKenzie's review "Surprising effects of the Original Genius exemplified in the Poetical Productions of Robert Burns, an Ayrshire Ploughman" turned Burns into a "socio-literary phenomenon", giving way to a new state of affairs with which Burns seemed to be quite at ease (Smith 2007: 74; Low 1974: 67). Inevitably, along with the good Burns came the bad Burns. However, what seems to baffle biographers the most was the somehow striking contrast between the good and the bad side of the ploughman

poet. Burns had the gift of the gab, he was friendly, generous and compassionate, a caring husband and a loving father. Lurking around the corner was his more dubious face, a Burns connected with shady immoral goings on that involved young boys, an unfaithful husband, a heavy-drinker, a bitter, arrogant and resentful human being (Fitzhugh 1935: 110, 119). One cannot help but wonder about Burns's extraordinary appeal, aside from his humble origin and misfortunes (Daiches 1963: 6); perhaps, as Walt Whitman affirms, had Burns lived by the book, had he led a less controversial and more moral existence, he would certainly not have become such a magnetic figure (Whitman 1886: 429).

Burns's relatively early death at the age of thirty-seven did nothing but expand the halo built around his persona. In fact, it would not be until after the poet's demise in 1796 that this fixation with all matters Burnsian started to go beyond the realms of mere attraction, this including his literary works (Whatley 2011: 657) where Burns's would also stamp his chameleonic personality. As mentioned previously, Burns, rather comfortable with his label of "heaven-taught ploughman" seemed to be in no rush to shake it off, quite on the contrary, he plainly took the opportunity to play the part he had been assigned. Some evidence of his pose as the not so cultured poet can be traced in his "Preface" to the Kilmarnock poems in which Burns magnifies the absence of poetic resources, which contrasts with the skill displayed in his collection (Daiches 1963: 25, 26).

Nevertheless, not everybody fell for Burns's act: some contemporary authors and commentators began to express their suspicions in some circles. John Logan, an Edinburgh critic based in London, maintained that Burns's knowledge of English poets was as good as his, while Walter Scott ratified this when insinuating that Burns's education could match that of a "gentleman's son" (Smith 2007: 75). A further instance of this deliberate posturing takes us back to "The Cotter's Saturday Night" where,

according to David Daiches, Burns's exaltation of pastoral life may have just been an attempt to please "the genteel sentimentalists of his day" (Daiches 1963: 7). Burns's chameleonic character makes him behave differently according to the circumstances, his personal correspondence being what best illustrates his adaptability (Scottish Poetry Library: 2012). However, not only do his letters reveal his particular ability to conform to the situation, but also display his code-switching skills between Scottish and English, even when writing to the same person, as was the case in some of the correspondence addressed to schoolmaster William Nicol. Writer Ian McIntyre goes as far as to weigh the possibility of Burns being under the influence of alcohol. But for author Jeremy J. Smith, MacIntyre may have simply succumbed to one of Burns's usual performances, "the Scots-speaking/-writing drinking-man" (Smith 2007: 78, 79). This language swap is not just a feature pertaining to some of his personal correspondence; Burns's Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions also reveal a bilingual mixture of poems written in English and Scottish vernacular, both languages appearing, at times, scrambled in the same poem (McNeill 2012: 117).

All this comes to show how Burns's chameleonic streak had quite a visible effect on his writing, despite the fact that gossip and criticism of a moral nature tended to take over his literary qualities, especially shortly after his death. All the same, what seems clear is that Burns had the power not to leave anyone indifferent. While Lord Byron was taken aback by the ploughman poet's "antithetical mind", Walter Scott considered Burns and Byron the "most genuine poetical geniuses of [his] time" (Low, 1974: 21, 31, 27, 260), both also being branded as "unethical" by some critics (Allan and Horova 2010: 166). Moreover, William Hazzlitt regarded Burns's extraordinary skill for descriptions of natural objects and feelings as second to none, and Ralph Waldo Emerson treated Burns and Goethe as "genius" (Low 1974: 327, 434). Thomas Moore praised Burns's

incomparable ability to merge words and music, while some other poets like John Keats would go on pilgrimage to the ploughman poet's resting place in Ayrshire. But among them all, William Wordsworth will probably be the one to profess the most genuine and outspoken admiration for Burns (Low 1974: 28, 174; Crawford 2009: 404). Wordsworth considered Burns's work, along with that of Cowper, as the only few examples of contemporary verse worth remembering. Wordsworth's profound appreciation of the Ayrshire poet made him compose "At the Grave of Burns" (1803), considered by Professor Harper as "one of the great elegies in our language", as well as "Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns" (1816) written in an attempt to clean Burns's badly damaged reputation after his death. Wordsworth's letter, helped by the fact that Walter Scott had turned to prose and Byron had disappeared from the scene, increased Burns's popularity as a national figure (Noyes 1944: 813, 814, 820, 826).

Burns's chameleonic nature reflected in his character and his writing has, yet again, raised new questions about the Scottish poet's place in British literature. While his use of the vernacular seems to link his poems to the Scottish tradition, can the same be said about his work in English? On the other hand, Burns appears to be much more than simply a local poet addressing his community in Scotland. It seems evident that reputed figures of the literary scene of the time were not only acquainted with his work, but also held his skills as a poet in high regard, some scholars daring to suggest that Wordsworth himself may have been influenced by Burns. Given his popularity in British literary circles, what stops Burns from being considered part of the British tradition?

PART 2: A JOURNEY TO NO MAN'S LAND

2.1. Burns's Eviction from the British tradition

2.1.1. The Invisible Poet in No Man's Land

From train stations all over Scotland to high-street book shops in London, Burns's editions of poems do not prove to be difficult to find, and, judging by their prices, they also seem far from being considered collectors' items either. In truth, Burns's industry has become quite a profitable business, turning over 150 million pounds in tourism revenue every year, and reaching as far afield as China, whose New Year coincides with the celebrations commemorating the birth of Robert Burns on the twenty-fifth of January (also known as "Burns Night"). Burns statues spread over three continents, while his bust stands alongside that of Shakespeare at Westminster Abbey (Pittock 2008: 145, 146, 147).

However, despite Burns's undeniable profitability and high popularity across the world, the ploughman poet seems to have fallen into oblivion, or, as David.B Morris puts it, into a "state of scandalous neglect" among literary critics and scholars, especially since the 1950's (Morris 1987: 3; Bentman 1972: 207). Burns, deemed by John Keats the "Great Shadow", considered by John Clare as a "major model" or placed by W.H. Auden in the same league as Lord Byron, has faded until becoming "the invisible man", being ignored by anthologies and literary canons (Pittock 2008: 146, 147). One may expect that this indifference towards the ploughman poet could, somehow, relate to the quality of his literary work. However, the root of Burns's state of invisibility seems to emerge from the belief that, being Scottish, his work is simply not entitled to be considered part of the British but the Scottish tradition (Bentman 1972: 207). To make matters even more confusing, but keeping in tune with Burns's usual chameleonic personality, some scholars also seem to support the existence of a "good Burns" and a "bad Burns". The "good

Burns", the Burns of "To a Mouse" or "Holy Willie's Prayer" wrote primarily in Scottish, which, in principle, would exclude these poems from the British tradition., although for other critics, the "good Burns" was so good that would not fit in any concrete tradition. The "bad Burns", the "English" Burns of "The Cotter's Saturday Night", among other poems, the Burns included in the British tradition by older academics, this Burns is not thought to measure up to literary standards, and, therefore, will not be worth a mention by modern critics. Finally, other influential experts like T.S. Eliot go as far as to consider Burns's hybrid delivery an impediment for his work to form part of British poetry (MacKay 2015; Bentman 1972: 210; McGuirk 2014).

Nevertheless, Burns, who, by no means, lived in any "cultural ghetto" in the Lowlands of Scotland, was not only acquainted with the major British poets since a very early age, but also felt part of a wider European context (Smith 2007: 88; McGuirk 2014: 9). Not long after the publication of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* in 1786, Burns's popularity had already reached England, and by the end of the eighteenth century his work was under close scrutiny by influential literary critics and editors like Francis Jeffrey or James Currie (Low 1974: 2). According to Raymond Bentman, Burns saw himself as participant of a British tradition, although he also professed his deepest admiration for the Scottish poets Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson in his preface to the Kilmarnock edition. English author Alexander Pope stood as Burns's favourite satirist, while other contemporary British writers like William Cowper, Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Gray or William Shenstone were held in very high regard by the ploughman poet (Bentman 1972: 211). Burns, who praised Gray and Shentone's way of depicting country scenes without bypassing the presence of country folk, frequently emulated their poetic style, such mimicry even being considered at times "over-the-top" by some critics.

Similarities aside, the ploughman poet always made sure he left his own imprint. "The Cotter's Saturday Night" may serve as an example to illustrate how Burns, while keeping Gray in mind, he also contradicted the English poet's belief that country people, despite their potential, were nevertheless destined to die in a state of complete ignorance, their talents hidden among poverty and illiteracy. Burns, faithful to his personal style, depicts a family scene where the eloquent farmer father engages in bible reading in a rather dignified manner, in contrast with Gray's own vision of the poor, defenceless peasants (McGuirk 2014: 89, 90).

2.1.2. Bad Language

For some scholars, the allegedly poor quality of Burns's so-called "English" poems constitutes enough proof of his weak command of the English language, which, in turn, would lead to assume that his literary work may not be apt to enter the realm of British tradition (Bentman 1972: 213). However, the "heaven-taught ploughman" was certainly no stranger to English. As a Scott in eighteenth-century Ayrshire, Burns would have been exposed not only to the language of the Lowlands, which, in fact, was considered a dialect of northern English, but also to the English literary tradition as part of his Anglocentric education, not forgetting about King James Bible, introduced after the Reformation, and an unavoidable reading in Calvinist Scotland ever since (Morris 1987: 13; Bentman 1960: 6). English, normally used in formal contexts and a synonym of power, would have been widely accepted in Burns's community, although, on the whole, Scottish speakers from urban and rural areas alike would have quite often had a fairly good command of English, both written and spoken. Dugald Stewart, a university professor and one of Burns's acquaintances in Edinburgh, spoke of his surprise at the "fluency, and precision, and originality of [Burns's]language", as well as his artful skill at erasing any "Scotticisms"

from his speech (Andrews 2006: 63; Smith 2007: 84). In fact, it seems that most members in Burns's Lowland community would have been "native speaker[s] of heteroglossia" (Morris 1987: 13). Despite his codeswitching abilities, Burns did admit not having quite the same proficiency in English than in his native dialect, not being able to express his ideas in the same vivid way as he would have done in his mother tongue. Likewise, the significant linguistic and cultural differences between both languages led some critics to refer to Burns's dialect, in a slightly exaggerated manner, as an "unknown tongue" (Morris 1987: 13). Perhaps, as Murray Pittock asserts, such deviations from what is considered standard English should not necessarily imply a lack of command of the language, and, by extension, become a decisive argument to determine the exclusion of Burns from the British tradition. If such were the case, shouldn't the same principle be applied to Spenser, Shakespeare or even Middle English? (Morris 1987: 13, 14; Pittock 2008: 145, 165).

In addition, labelling writers such as Burns or Fergusson "peasant poets" is not likely to depict a favourable opinion on their abilities to write in English, nor those instances when Burns declares that he simply writes "for fun" (Pittock 2008: 11; McGuirk 2014: 13). His allegedly "bad English", however, did not stop Burns's contemporary critics and editors from favouring his sentimental "English" poems in detriment of those written in the more "obscure" vernacular, and, therefore, tried to persuade him to follow this trend. Even so, Burns, being Burns, refused to give in entirely to the taste of the Edinburgh *literati* of the time (Daiches 1963: 12).

In other literary circles the root of the problem was not so much Burns's inadequate use of English as his failure to produce decent sentimental poetry in English in an attempt to follow the eighteenth-century tradition. While Burns's vernacular poems unfolded deep feelings emerging from real life experience depicted in vivid detail, the

ploughman poet's major handicap seems to originate in his inability to deal with poetry of abstraction, as is the case in his poem "Despondency". Just as Burns does in "To a Mouse", "Despondency" also deals with the penuries and uncertainties of human life, "grief" and "care" being the burden man must carry in his "rough" and "weary" road of life. The expressive imagery employed by Burns in "To a Mouse", in which, for instance, winter is described as being *sleety dribble* and *cranreuch cauld* [frosty cold], is precisely what "Despondency" seems to lack, contributing to a sense of vagueness, in such way that, at the end of the poem, the reader will be none the wiser on the speaker's predicament. (Bentman 1972: 213, 214).

A further argument put forward to help shed some light in the question of Burns's "bad English" would be the apparent lack of interest in English poetry composed by eighteenth-century Scottish authors, which tended to be disregarded on grounds of its imitative nature. Nonetheless, poetic emulation constituted a widespread teaching device applied not only in Scotland but also in England, with poets of the calibre of Blake being praised precisely for exercising the art of imitation. "The Cotter's Saturday Night", far from being a mere copy, was often disdained for its over-conventional pastoral depiction of a Scottish family, which may hint at a bias attitude on the part of the critics. Homi Bhabha's concept of mimicry (1994: 85) understood in this specific context of post-Union Scotland may help explain why imitation of English models by Scottish poets might have raised a few eyebrows in neighbouring England. Just as Scottish prosperity triggered certain animosity south of the border, it is no surprise that the idea of cultural English models being injected with a dose of "Scottishness" would have been considered a threat, and therefore, dismissed.

At times, nationalist references would be "camouflaged" under the façade of resemblance to English models, as is the case in Burns's poem "Address to Edinburgh"

(Andrews 2006: 60, 61, 64, 65, 66, 67, 75). But more importantly, wouldn't this routine assimilation of English models by Burns and his predecessors link them to some extent to the British tradition from which they were being evicted?

2.2. Knocking on the Door of the Scottish Tradition

2.2.1. A Great Alien Tradition

The "decadent representative of a great alien tradition", is the way in which T.S. Eliot expressed his views on Burns in 1933, years after he had published in the British magazine *Athenaeum* quite a controversial article entitled "Was there a Scottish Literature?". Indeed, the rather provocative assumption was not likely to go unnoticed, attracting a great deal of interest fuelled by Eliot's self-assurance (McGuirk 2014: 8). Controversies aside, the cultural and literary course of Burns's post-Union Scotland did seem to have gone through a significant transformation since the Middle Ages, a time when the country not only was proud of its own flourishing literary tradition, with poets like Robert Henryson and William Dunbar as major figures in the fifteenth century, but also had its very own literary language (Daiches 1963: 8, 9). However, a series of events at the end of the fifteenth century were about to shake the future of Scotland, of its language and of its literary tradition. The Union of the Crowns along with the enormous prestige of Elizabethan writers and the Protestant Reformation introduced by John Knox turned Southern English into the language of court, literature and also the Church of Scotland. In the meantime, Scots went from being a separate language in its own right to becoming a series of provincial dialects resembling more southern English, especially in Burns's native Lowlands. Katherine T. Fustich, quoting David S. Hewitt's words, describes the linguistic process in quite a graphic manner as British English "infecting"

the grammatical system of the Scottish language (Fustich n.d.).The Union of Parliaments meant the closure of a cycle that had started before the fifteenth century, but also marked the beginning of a renewed interest in Scotland's literary past, although, by then, Scottish writers had already embraced English as their literary medium.

In a 1775 collection of poems by Scottish authors called *The Caledoniad,* in which Burns was not present, only seven poems out of the one hundred and seventy seemed to be written with any "hint" of the vernacular, while the rest would adopt standard English (Daiches 1994: 809; Bentman 1960: 7, 8; Daiches 1963: 10). Given the precarious situation of Scots as a literary language, and after being evicted by some scholars from British literature, was there really a Scottish tradition for Burns to call home?

What seems clear is that Burns was certainly not alone in eighteenth-century literary Scotland; names like William Hamilton, John Lapraik, James MacPherson or James Thomson spring up in the literary scene, despite the fact that the poetic production of the time has usually been narrowed down to the work of three men only: Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns, defined by some as the "nationalist vanguard" (Andrews 2006: 61). In an attempt to keep such nationalist feeling alive, certain editors, publishers and poets joined forces to preserve the old tradition and keep the agonizing Scottish literary language afloat in the form of poems written in regional dialects, or imitating older literary works. Despite the effort, the complexity of medieval Scottish poetry did not prove quite popular, although the interest in Scottish folk-poetry and music allowed for a breathing space. The fact that the always influential Edinburgh *literati* dismissed Scottish verse in favour of sentimental literature in English did not help to give the vernacular movement a much-needed boost (Daiches 1963: 10, 12).

Although Burns quoted Shakespeare, Thomson, Pope or Goldsmith most frequently (not forgetting the Bible as his primary source), there seems to be no question about the influence of Ramsay, and, to a greater extent, of Fergusson on Burns's literary work (Bentman 1972: 211). Burns himself declares in his "Preface" to the Kilmarnock edition how he feels part of a Scottish school whose greatest exponents were Ramsay and Fergusson, but pointing out at the same time that he takes their work into consideration "rather with a view to kindle at their flame, than for servile imitation" (Weston 1960: 646). From both poets Burns would inherit particular stanza forms, the use of the vernacular, as well as their subject matter.

However, according to Raymond Bentman, Burns hardly ever quoted Ramsay or Fergusson, as opposed to some other English, perhaps this being the reason which led some scholars to the assumption that Burn's pro-Scottish positioning did not have much to do with literary heritage as with the political situation in eighteenth-century Scotland (Bentman 1972: 211, 212). Indeed, despite Ramsay's efforts to try and capture the essence of the older Scottish tradition, the London Augustans and the certainly more genteel readership in the capital seemed to have got in the way, even when using Scottish words. Fergusson, on the other hand, did not hide his hostility to the elevated tone adopted by most writers, although he was no stranger either to "high" diction in certain contexts, for instance, in *The Sow of Feeling,* a parody of Henry Mackenzie's sentimental novel *The Man of Feeling.* Notwithstanding their opposed views with respect to English neoclassicism, neither of them seemed to deviate from mainstream British tradition, the vernacular simply being used within the context of contemporary literature in Britain (McGuirk 1977:57). In the light of this, one may actually wonder whether the vernacular revival of Scots, in truth, constitutes a separate literary movement detached from the British tradition, or, as T.S.Eliot expressed it in *The Athenaeum*, an "alien" tradition.

Perhaps one of the poems which best illustrates the elusive Scottish tradition inherited by Burns through Ramsay and Fergusson would be "Poor Mailie's Elegy", a mock lament for the death of a pet sheep, the same ewe already encountered in "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie". The rather loose tradition from which Burns receives his inspiration goes back to an eighteenth-century type of humorous elegy which recounts the life and personality of the departed, usually some eccentric, low-class local character. The overall tone of such elegies was light, and, as it may be expected, the focal point was not so much the grief for the passing of the deceased as their activities while they were alive or the description of the place where they lived. Just as his predecessors', "Poor Mailie's Elegy" is also written in the dialect of the Lowlands, and following suit, Burns also uses the Standard Habbie, an old Scots six-lined stanza (AAA, B, A, B) brought back into fashion by the vernacular movement, whose final line repeats the word "dead", as illustrated in the first two stanzas of the poem:

Lament in rhyme, lament in prose

Wi' saut tears trickling down your nose;

Our *Bardie's* fate is at a close

Past a' remead!

The last, sad cape-stane of his woes;

Poor Mailie's dead!

It's no the loss o'warls's gear

That could sae bitter draw the tear

Or make our *Bardie*, dowie, wear

The mourning weed:

He's lost a friend and neebor dear,

In *Mailie's* dead.

(Burns 1993: 10, 11)

Burns, however, introduces significant variations, the most obvious being Mailie, a non-human subject treated as human, as well as a change of focus from the subject of the elegy to the state of mind of the mourner. By doing so, Burns accomplishes a "humour of exaggeration" while getting closer, unlike his predecessors, to the true nature of mock elegy, which, in essence, involves a tension between the subject matter and the expression, between Mailie's death and a type of language which would have been best suited for a human death. Did the "heaven-taught" ploughman discover the real mock-elegy with the help of his natural genius, or, what seems more reasonable, through his prior knowledge of the English tradition? (Weston 1960: 635, 640, 642, 643, 644). So far it seems that Burns is not any closer to leave the literary limbo of no man's land.

2.2.2. Lost for Words

For Burns and his fellow vernacular crusaders, reclaiming their own poetic space in eighteenth-century Scotland did not prove to be plain sailing. However, despite their common mission, Ramsay and Fergusson's reasons for infusing their literary work with vernacular Scots seemed to differ from those of Burns, whose focus veered towards the struggle of rural folk. While for Ramsay and Fergusson the use of dialect was a means to represent the urban speech in the city of Edinburgh, Burns seizes this opportunity to

provide rural workers with their own voice. Poor peasants, usually depicted as mute, passive subjects, were considered as perfect material for elegies in eighteenth-century, the prototype of the good victim, just as the dead country folk had been in Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" (1751). By bestowing upon his characters the freedom of speech Burns effectively erased any mediation between poet and reader in most of his poems, as is the case in "Holy Willie's Prayer" or "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie", in which both Willie Fisher and the pet sheep take the role of subjects addressing their audience directly (McGuirk 2014: 10, 11, 18).

In fact, the use of the vernacular brings Burns's literary work closer to social communicative exchanges of everyday life, distancing himself from the always homogeneous neoclassical poetry. In this way, for Burns, as opposed to Pope, a poetic epistle would become a replacement for speech, for the "blether" in the tavern, for a type of language in the realms of social discourse. This kind of dialogical nature in Burns's poetry will also go hand in hand with a concept perhaps more associated with the novel at that time: *heteroglossia.* Bakhtin conceives the notion of *heteroglossia* as "another's speech in another's language", in such way that the poet, through the voice of the other, would be able to convey his own intentions, creating a "double-voiced discourse" in which both the author and the character speak simultaneously expressing, however, two different purposes (Bakhtin 1981: 324). Heteroglossia, therefore, implies much more than the simple mixing of English and Scottish vernacular, or the presence of multiple speech-types; it works as a means to preserve the distinctive characteristics of the different individuals and social groups, the sometimes "impenetrable worlds of discourse" (Morris 1987: 14) between England and Scotland, hence that, for some scholars, the glossaries included by Burns were unfortunately not quite sufficient (Morris 1987: 8, 9, 10, 11, 14; Daiches 1963: 23, 24).

The opening of "Tam o'Shanter. A Tale", considered by some critics as one of the most splendid openings in eighteenth-century poetry, may serve to illustrate Burns's ability for codeswitching between Scots and English:

When chapman billies leave the street,

And drouthy neebors, neebors meet,

As market-days are wearing late,

An' folk begin to tak the gate;

While we sit bousing at the nappy,

And getting fou and unco happy,

We think na on the lang Scots miles,

The mosses, waters, slaps and styles,

That lie us and our hame,

Whare sits our sulky sullen dame,

Gathering her brows like gathering storm,

Nursing her wrath to keep her warm.

(Burns 1993, 160)

Along with the sprinkling of Scots words such as *fou* [full/drunk], *unco* [very] or *nappy* [strong ale], some of the rhyming features also encode this hybrid encounter of languages, as is the case in *hame* and "dame" in the penultimate couplet, in which "home" adopts the Scots diction of *hame*. However, Burns switches back to the English pronunciation in the last two lines in such way that "storm" and "warm" would become rhyming words

(the rounding of [a] when preceded by [w] would not have been yet in place in Scotland at that time). Likewise, English would appear in the morphology of the present participles in which *-ing* replaces the most common Norse-derived suffix *-an* (Smith 2007: 82, 83). Along with the rhyme and grammatical features, it seems that standard English and Scots are also assigned different tasks: while the former represents the language of distance and announcement (the departure of the "chapman billies", that is, the people who supplied printed ballads) as well as judgement (the cold reception that awaits the inebriated husband at home in the last couplet), the latter, on the other hand, mirrors the tongue of the community, the "we" enjoying the "banter" in the tavern, which, by no means, depicts an inferior dialect (Pittock 2008: 158, 159).

"The Cotter's Saturday Night" constitutes a further example of Burns's poetic mixture of Scots and English in which the standard-English stanzas, resembling the style of poets like Oliver Goldsmith or Thomas Gray, are aimed at those elevated passages that venerate the dignified life of country people, while the characters would be brought to life through the use of the expressive vernacular (McGuirk: 2014: 90).

The vernacular, "the real language of men", is precisely what most attracted poets like Wordsworth and all those critics who truly believed that the best version of Burns, the wittiest and more fluent, hid behind his native dialect (McNeill 2012: 117). Given Burns's Anglocentric education and his fairly good knowledge of English, despite this being open to debate, writing in Scots would not have been a matter of necessity, but a matter of poetic option, not only for Burns but also for poets like Ramsay and Fergusson (Pittock 2008: 147). For eighteenth-century Scottish writers, the vernacular was in itself an appropriate, but not compulsory, poetic medium and a suitable language to articulate their patriotic feelings (Andrews 2006: 65). The use of his native dialect also led Burns to take great care in the supervision of the glossaries appended to each of his three editions

of poems, although he did not include words generally known and those different from standard English in only the verb suffix or the omission of letters with the use of an apostrophe. The insertion of glossaries seems to suggest that Burns was not just writing for a local audience, but, more likely, aiming at readers south of the border.

However, some scholars like Franklyn B Snyder have noted that there are still some unexplained words that would have been unintelligible for English readers, concluding that the glossaries were actually not intended for them, but, surprisingly, for his local Ayrshire audience. There seems to be evidence proving that the "real language of men" used by Burns was, in fact, not so real. Statistician Sir John Sinclair, a contemporary of Burns and a native Scott, considered the ploughman poet's language "quaint", while Burns's brother Gilbert remarked that "[…] the Scotticisms of [Burns's] language scarcely seemed affected, but appeared to be the natural language of the poet". Gilbert's comment not only implies that "Scotticisms", considered an affectation in poetry at that time, had been successfully concealed by Burns, but also that the dialect used in the poems, despite not being "the natural language of the poet", was somehow made to seem so (Snyder 1928: 513, 516, 517, 518).

In 1873 Scottish lexicographer and philologist Sir James Murray reached the conclusion that what Wordsworth thought to be a "spontaneous" dialect was not the vernacular but "a literary language which was much English as Scottish" (Bentman 1960:11). At about the same time, the poet James Montgomery writing in the British periodical *Eclectic Review* described Burns's so-called vernacular as a "dialect [not] spoken by any class of men in our whole island" (Low 1974: 33), while for scholar Franklyn B. Snyder Burns's language would be a representation of "the general dialect of southern Scotland" (Snyder 1928: 512). The list continues, and yet, according to Raymond Bentman, the great majority of critics, writers and readers still stick to the belief

that Burns did actually write as he spoke. What seems clear is that Burns, perhaps fashioning himself once more as the "heaven-taught ploughman", managed to create quite a "convincing" artificial dialect turning the vernacular into a literary medium that would have probably fallen into oblivion had it not been for the "genius" of the ploughman poet (Bentman 1960: 27; Snyder 1927: 516).

2.3. At the Doorstep of Romanticism

2.3.1. Long Lost Brother

Samuel T. Coleridge, John Keats, Walter Scott, Charles Lamb, these are just some writers who openly expressed their admiration for Robert Burns's work. As such, it seems that Robert Burns was certainly not short of outstanding Romantic admirers. However, among this elite group of followers, the one who truly managed to stand out from the crowd and surpass all levels of admiration for Burns happened to be no other than William Wordsworth. "The least fraternal of great English poets" (Butler 1996) seemed to have found his long lost brother embodied in the person of a ploughman poet eleven years older than him, whom he had never met or corresponded, but "whose light he hailed when first it shone" (Noyes 1944: 813). In truth, part of Wordsworth's magnetic attraction towards Burns emerges from his somehow distorted vision of the ploughman poet as a lonely, pitiable figure, which stems, partly from the generally unfounded gossip about Burns's dysfunctional way of life, and partly from Wordsworth's own fascination for truly emotional works, as was the case of those included in Burns's Kilmarnock edition of his poems. In this way, poems like "To a Mountain Daisy", would have been interpreted by Wordsworth as a reflection of what he thought to be Burn's accustomed state of mind rather than as a depiction of an isolated moment of personal crisis in 1786

(McGuirk 2014: 88, 95, 106). Despite Wordsworth's later criticism at a time when he seemed to have disapproved of any author but himself, no other contemporary poet received as much undivided attention from Wordsworth as Burns, whom the English poet regarded as a teacher and a source of inspiration (Bentman 1960: 107).

The origins of such inspiration may be traced as far back as 1786 when Burns's Kilmarnock edition first saw the light, preparing the ground for what nearly fifteen years later would become Wordsworth and Coleridge's Romantic manifesto in the form of their *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (Noyes 1944: 830). In the brief but effective "Preface" to the Kilmarnock edition of poems Burns takes this opportunity to introduce himself as the unlettered poet that he was certainly not, expressing in English his intention to write in the Scottish dialect, reminiscent of Wordsworth's "language really used by men" (Wordsworth 1998: 357), while pointing out that all those readers unable to understand his native tongue would face a "fountain shut up, and a book sealed" (Burns 1786: iii). Burns's rather fervent defence of the vernacular would also seem to be in line with Wordsworth's fears for "youthful Poets who are in danger of being carried away by the inundation of foreign literature" as asserted in a note written by the English poet in 1842 (Low 1974: 163). Furthermore, Burns's role as the ploughman poet not only will determine the rural theme of his poems, in tune with Wordsworth's "low and rustic life" (Wordsworth 1998: 357), but also the position of the poet as an unlearnt artist of natural genius. With this is mind, there seems to be a parallel to the notion of the romantic artist depicted by Wordsworth in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* when describing the poet as "a man speaking to men […] who has a greater knowledge of human nature" (Wordsworth 1998: 360). In line with his fashioning as an untaught poet, Burns will also express his intention to distance himself from literary and social conventions becoming a poet who "[s]ings the [s]entiments and manners" (Burns 1786: iii), which, once again, seems to

echo Wordsworth's delineation of what should constitute a romantic artist, criticising all those poets who "separate themselves from the sympathies of men and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression" (Wordsworth 1998: 357).

Not only does the ploughman poet appear to anticipate Wordsworth in the Kilmarnock edition with respect to the poetic voice and the choice of linguistic register, but also in his two Commonplace Books written between 1783 and 1790, in which Burns objects to the task of the poet seen as a mere intellectual practice, advocating for a type of poetry which Wordsworth would also postulate in his "Preface", a style of poetry inspired to "keep the reader in the company of flesh and blood" (Wordsworth 1998: 360). Burns, faithful to the idea of genuineness, would also be in the pursuit of the "flesh and blood", those real images rooted in actual observation, keeping away from anything that may seem phoney or artificial (Bentman 1960: 95). However influential Burns's Commonplace books and the Kilmarnock edition of poems might have been for Wordsworth, such literary works, nevertheless, lacked the theoretical strength of Wordsworth and Coleridge's Romantic manifesto, while one would imagine the recognition of such influence in Romantic circles to be inconsequential (Noyes 1944: 830).

Furthermore, and as expected, not all scholars seemed to be on the same page with regards to the extent of Burns's repercussion over Wordsworth; for academics such as D.W. Rannie and Oliver Elton, representatives of the more traditional approach, such influence would have been merely casual, stating that, despite the English poet's undeniable admiration for Burns, in truth, Wordsworth did not appear to have learnt much from the ploughman poet from a lyrical point of view. On the other hand, experts like Carol McGuirk or Russell Noyes would argue Wordsworth's unmistakeable poetic debt to Burns to the point of claiming that in some of his poems Wordsworth "demonstrably

borrows direct from Burns" (Noyes 1944: 813) reaching such a degree of symbiosis that one could indeed label Wordsworth's speaker "Burnsworth" (McGuirk 2014: 75). And while the more dubious opinions with respect to such conspicuous borrowing would also allege the brevity of the period of influence, limited to the years between 1798-1805, other commentators would, nevertheless, emphasize the fact that such period does actually coincide with Wordsworth's golden era (Bentman 1960: 136).

For those scholars who consider the ploughman poet more than just a casual influence on Wordsworth's literary work, the first sign of imitation seems to emanate from Burns's simple manner to approach nature, and, to some extent, from his reaction to the mysterious power of nature, portrayed, for instance, in Burns's poem "The Vision" in which his heavenly muse Coila talks to the poet as one who has been deeply touched by such enigmatic natural power, as shown below:

I saw thee seek the sounding shore,

Delighted with the dashing roar;

Or when the North his fleecy store

Drove thro' the sky,

I saw grim Nature's visage hoar

Struck thy young eye.

(Burns 1993: 46)

Likewise, Burns's affinity with nature, portrayed in "Man was Made to Mourn", also seems to be infused in Wordsworth's poem "Lines Written in Early Spring", as the following comparison of fragments reveals:

Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn
("Man was Made to Mourn. A Dirge")
(Burns 1993: 55)

And much it grieved my heart to think
What man had made of man
("Lines Written in Early Spring")
(Wordsworth 1998: 233)

The presence of flowers and birds in some of Burns's poems, as is the case in "To a Mountain Daisy", would be also mirrored in Wordsworth's "To the Daisy":

Thou lifts thy *unassuming* head
In Humble guise.
("To a Mountain Daisy")
(Burns 1993: 124)

Thou *unassuming* Common-place
Of Nature, with that homely face.
("To the Daisy")
(Wordsworth 1967: 125)

Where love poems are concerned, Burns appears to employ images and themes reminiscent of Wordsworth's Lucy poems: "The Lass o' Ballochmyle", for instance, depicts a young woman character who, like Lucy, dwells in secluded natural settings, and, just as Lucy, could also be compared to nature itself:

With careless step I onward stray'd
My heart rejoiced in nature's joy,
When musing in a lonely glade,
A maiden fair I chanced to spy;
Her look was like the morning's eye.
Her hair like nature's vernal smile;
The lilies's hue and roses' die

Bespoke the Lass o'Ballochmyle

(Burns 1969: 178-179)

The human aspect, a hallmark in Burn's poetry clearly depicted in his poem "Tam o'Shanter. A Tale" (1793), would also constitute one of the literary features widely admired by Wordsworth. Indeed, the longest, most challenging, and also closest imitation of Burns's original work may be identified in Wordsworth's poem "The Waggoner" (1805), inspired in "Tam o'Shanter", a humorous tale recounting the adventures of inebriated Tam during a wild thunderstorm, which would also frame the theme and setting for Wordsworth's drunken character Benjamin in "The Waggoner". The poems, in which the speaker apologizes for displaying such a state of drunken euphoria in a rather indulgent manner, depict a stormy night, both poems paying special attention to the raging wind, the ghastly thunder and lightning and the torrential rain, both also describing an eerie night in which ghosts and howling owls terrify their intoxicated characters. As much as Wordsworth professed his fondest admiration for the ploughman poet, and despite all the apparent similarities between both poems, the English poet, on this occasion, failed to give Burns any credit (Noyes 1944: 814-819, 822, 823; Bentman 1960: 111).

Even though the examples above appear to capture some significant likeness between Burns and Wordsworth with regards to their choice of subject matter, expression and the way in which both poets deal with various topics, certain aspects in Burns's attitude towards nature seem to differ from that of the English poet. Indeed, what appeared to have puzzled Wordsworth the most about Burns was the fact that a poet of such great sensibility, as shown in poems like "To a Mouse" or "To a Mountain Daisy", could, nevertheless, remain undeterred by the breath-taking beauty of the nearby Peaks of Arran; in essence, Burns "never spoke of the grandeur of nature" (Bentman 1960: 63).

The ploughman poet gives the impression that he is more concerned with the notion of nature conceived as an object of observation, nature as the "immediate environment" and a symbol in itself (Bentman 1960: 63). For Burns nature would therefore be more human, more familiar, and not so much a hiding place for strange phenomena or fleeting images of reflections or shifting lights. While for some scholars such as Auguste Angellier Burns seems to be typically following a trend in the Scottish tradition with no connection whatsoever with the treatment of nature in British literature, and, by extension, in the Romantic movement, for other academics this argument in itself would not be powerful enough to disassociate Burns from the Romantic poetry (Noyes 1944: 14; Bentman 1960: 63, 132, 133). A further difference to be noted between Burns and Wordsworth springs from the already mentioned dialogical tone in the Ayrshire poet's poems, his love songs suggesting company rather than loneliness, and his satires and narrative poems, like the aforementioned "Tam o'Shanter", usually involving the local community. Burns, in that respect, as Alan Riach implies, seems to differ from the normal position of the Romantic poet as a single speaker detached from the object of perception, an idea reflected in Wordsworth's poem "The Solitary Reaper" in which "the solitary Highland lass" belongs to a different cultural and language community (Riach 2011: 55, 56). In tune with this dialogical aspect, Burns's address poems also build up an array of speakers who serve not only as framing elements, but also as actors, as is the case in "To a Mouse". In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker's voice (the agent) would be that of a poor tenant farmer who addresses in his local dialect a mouse whose nest has disturbed: "Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie […] Thou need na start awa sae hasty" (Burns 1993: 67). Yet, this voice is followed by a further intervening passerby who speaks in English: "I'm truly sorry Man's dominion/ Has broken Nature's social union" (Burns 1993: 67), which shows how both agent and spectator seem to become one. Wordsworth's

poetic voice, on the other hand, depicts or unfolds his "solitaries" by asking a silent, unknown listener a question, as is the case in "The Solitary Reaper" when the speaker exhorts: "Will no one tell me what she sings?" (Pittock 2008: 151, 153; Riach 2011: 56).

Leaving aside these differences and judging by some of the distinct similarities between both poets, not forgetting about Wordsworth's explicit displays of admiration for the ploughman poet, one would perhaps expect Burns to be a step closer to that literary place he could finally call home; however, will this little push from "the least fraternal of the great Romantics" be enough to propel Burns in the right direction?

2.3.2. May I Come In?

Burns was not one to sit still. His clever manipulation of the vernacular inherited from Ramsay and Fergusson in his attempt to capture the simplicity of the common language of his country folk has taken him further away from the Augustan poetic diction (Noyes 1944: 830). Likewise, Burns goes as far as to adapt traditional stanzaic forms like the Standard Habbie to new rustic settings, using the shorter fourth and sixth lines to imitate the rhythm of conversation, anticipating in this way Byron's conversational *ottava rima* (Leask 2010: 8; Bentman 1972: 224). This shift continues its course paving a new path in which Burns would stamp his personal footprint by carrying out relevant thematic variations in Augustan poetry, as is the case in the theme of man wandering in nature, employed, among others, by William Cowper and James Thomson, two of the authors most admired by the ploughman poet. Burns picks up the image of man wandering carefree in a rustic scene, yet responsive to the natural world, but goes beyond it, creating a more complex fusion between the emotions of man and the surrounding nature, which seem to become one, giving way to a united vision of God and nature. This new

development in the theme of man wandering would inspire poets like Coleridge, Keats or Byron, and, to a greater extent, Wordsworth, who, like Burns, also understands the image of wandering as symbol of freedom, as illustrated in "The Prelude" (1850) or in "Tintern Abbey" (1798), in which Wordsworth, however, reaches a new level of deeper understanding (Bentman 1972: 219-223)

Burns's shift from neoclassical poetry to more Romantic modes continues its flow, this time encompassing the ploughman poet's unique approach to animals, perceived not just as mere talking parodies of human beings or as symbols of human character, but treating them as real creatures. In this way, Mailie, the mouse and even the mountain daisy become representations of universal sentiments of empathy and frailty anticipating the animal poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. It might be for these developments that some scholars deem Burns as one of the most inventive poets ever to exist in Britain from Pope to Blake, considering him, just as Wordsworth did, a kind of pioneer, a precursor of the Romantic movement, not only for his progressive distancing from the previous Augustan tradition, as illustrated above, but also for his challenging choice of poetic diction, which seemed to have shaken the classical canon at the time (Low 1974: 28; Leask 2010: 2).

However, in some literary circles such achievements do not seem to constitute a strong enough argument as to let Burns cross the door that leads to Romanticism. Aside from those academics opposed to any plausible connection between Burns's Scottish verse and the British tradition, other opinions, as that of David Daiches, point their finger at more specific features in the ploughman poet's literary work, the lack of sublimity being one of the most decisive factors to discard Burns from the Romantic movement, while for scholars like Matthew Arnold the inexistent seriousness and epic flair in Burns's poetry stands as the main reason to ban him from Romanticism (Bentman 1960: 137;

Davis, Duncan, Sorensen 2004: 4). Given this state of affairs, one may actually start wondering whether Burns's seemingly conspicuous influence on *Lyrical Ballads* might have actually been taken into any consideration after all. In fact, *Lyrical Ballads* seems to have turned into some kind of double-edged sword which both recognises Burns's influence, but makes him invisible at the same time. The key to this conundrum boils down to the fact that Burns died only two years before *Lyrical Ballads* saw the light in 1798, and that the two-year gap may have led to his marginalization from the romantic mainstream, this being the reason why the ploughman poet would be considered by some scholars a precursor rather than a participant of the Romantic tradition (Pittock 2003: 192, 211).

Likewise, Burns would also face exclusion from what is proving to be the elusive Romantic territory on grounds of his hybrid poetic diction. The *monoglossia* that characterises Romanticism seems to have emerged from a paradigmatic shift more acute after World War II, a shift to a more introspective romantic model which seemed to prioritise imagination, transcendence and subjectivity, a model in which Burns would be no longer welcomed, partly because of the marked social dimension of his literary work, and partly because of his dialect. A more historical-contextual approach on the analysis of Romanticism would surface again in the 1980s, from which Burns would appear coated in working-class status, his use of non-Standard English merely being tied to his condition of "peasant poet", which would, then again, cast a cloud over Burns's ability to write in English (Pittock 2008: 9, 10,11).

A further argument would leave us wondering whether the search for a Romantic place in which Burns could finally settle may eventually turn out to be a futile task. Indeed, some scholars like poet Edwin Muir are more of the opinion that Romanticism bypassed Scotland arguing that the country's cultural history was in fact too Calvinistic,

or too Neoclassical or both to meet the romantic requirements that less religious and more dynamic neighbouring England had apparently been able to achieve (Pittock 2011: 78). Furthermore, where Scotland is concerned, a century-long cultural movement which started with David Hume's *Treatise to Human Nature* (1739-1740) and ended with Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837) seemed to have got in the way of Romanticism: The Enlightenment. As a post-Union cultural expression born in Lowland Scotland, the Enlightenment encompassed a series of innovations from moral philosophy and history to poetry and journalism, at a time when Scottish universities would subsidy both treatises of intellectuals like Adam Smith or David Hume, and projects of revival of cultural traditions such as James Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* (Davis, Duncan, Sorensen 2004: 2, 3, 11, 12). In this context, academics like Ian Duncan consider that, when Scotland is in the picture, it would probably make more sense to refer to this period as a century-long cultural movement rather than a "distinct phase of Romanticism" (Duncan 2006), which, of course, would leave wandering Burns waiting in vain at the doorstep of Romanticism.

Conclusion

Robert Burns's era in mid-eighteenth-century Scotland was not an ordinary one. The winds of change were blowing strong in a country whose meteoric growth was witness to the transition from feudalism to the beginning of agrarian capitalism and the rising of "improvement" tenant farmers such as Burns's father. This process did not go without struggle, while the ploughman poet's humble origins would not only mark his life but also his literary work in which Burns would capture his renown empathy towards his fellow country folk in a simple and natural manner.

Nevertheless, such spontaneity would also be subject to criticism, most of it related to Burns's allegedly deficient use of English. Indeed, bearing in mind his humble upbringing in rural Scotland, one would be inclined to question the ploughman poet's literacy, and yet, nothing could have been farther from the truth. The universality of education, hallmark of the Scottish Enlightenment, allowed most rural areas to have schools, but, most importantly, the prominently Anglocentric nature of the education system in Scotland meant that Burns would have been exposed to English authors and to the English language from a very early age. Furthermore, the reading of King James Bible, an essential requirement in strict Calvinist Ayrshire, would also constitute a strong argument against Burns's illiteracy as potential justification for his exclusion from the British tradition.

However, despite Burns's Calvinist upbringing, the ploughman poet would actually use his poetry as a means to denounce what he considered hypocrite behaviour on the part of orthodox Presbyterianism. Controversies aside, the employment of common life events as subject matter in his poetry, along with Burns's apparent straightforward style, seem to comply with some relevant precepts postulated in Wordsworth and Coleridge's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads.*

Faithful to his egalitarian principles, Burns's dangerous political allegiances to the American and the French revolutions, and his even riskier suspected affinity to the Jacobite cause had to remain unnoticed, hence the ambiguous interpretations of some of his poems. Most importantly, the ploughman poet's democratic spirit would also go hand in hand with the use of the vernacular, which Burns seemed to have inherited from his Scottish predecessors, suggesting in this way his connection with a Scottish literary tradition.

What seems clear is that despite his hordes of illustrious admirers in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Burns appears to have become invisible in the British tradition. While his literary work in the vernacular was deemed unfit to be considered part of British literature on grounds of being an alien language, the poor command of English of his "English" poems would constitute a further argument for this neglect. For other academics, however, the so-called "bad Burns" would have been merely attempting to imitate the eighteenth-century English sentimental tradition, resulting in his failure to deal with abstractions, which would explain the alleged bad quality of these poems. The ploughman poet's imitation of the English models, a normal practice within the British tradition, was, nevertheless, subject to criticism when Burns was in the picture, leading to suggest a biased behaviour from scholars south of the border. Indeed, in the context of post-Union Britain, seeing English literature being moulded by Scottish authors may have indeed unsettled a few critics.

Since Burns appears to face rejection from the British tradition, one would imagine a slightly warmer welcome by the Scottish literature. However, by the eighteenth century, southern English had effectively become the literary medium in post-Union Scotland, and despite the emergence of a revival movement in an attempt to recover the vibrant literature in Scots that once existed in the Middle Ages, in truth, most Scottish

authors opted for employing English. Burns's predecessors Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, from whom the ploughman poet inherited their style, subject matter and the use of the vernacular, did not, nevertheless, seem to deviate much from mainstream British tradition. Burns, on the other hand, introduced relevant variations regarding style and the use of the vernacular, which, unlike Ramsay and Fergusson, became the speech of rural folk. However, what Wordsworth thought to be the "real language of men" was, in fact, a quite convincing artificial dialect, a new literary medium.

Not only did Wordsworth admire Burns, whom he considered his teacher, but the similarities between the literary work of both poets seemed at times far too conspicuous to be ignored. Likewise, Burns's implementation of significant thematic developments which appeared to break away the Augustan tradition, influenced other Romantic authors aside form Wordsworth. Some critics, however, would reject Burns's connection with British Romanticism considering his similarities with Wordsworth's work as merely accidental, while pinpointing relevant differences between both poets. Furthermore, the sometimes-prevailing notion of Romanticism as *monoglossic* and introspective, and the fact that the ploughman poet died before the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, would also rule out Burns's inclusion in the Romantic movement.

Taking all the arguments into consideration, it seems that Burns might have been following the legacy of a Scottish tradition which, rather than facing extinction, may have been going through a process of change precipitated by the new order of things in post-Union Scotland, the most visible of those changes being the use of standard English as literary medium. In this way, even though Burns's predecessors would have been under the influence of a loose Scottish tradition, and despite writing in the vernacular, they did not appear, nevertheless, to deviate greatly from the British tradition.

Having said this, the fact that Burns may be considered part of a Scottish literary school would not necessarily imply his exclusion from the British tradition in the context of post-Union Scotland. In this respect, the vernacular should be better conceived as a deviation from Standard English rather than an alien tongue, not forgetting, in any case, that Burns's Lowland dialect resembled northern English. Despite his appropriate command of the English language being put into question, there seems to be enough evidence suggesting otherwise. Not only did the ploughman poet write in English, but he also imitated, to a greater or lesser extent, the English models, which would undoubtedly require great familiarity, both with the language and with British literature. In addition, Burns became much more than a local poet in Scotland; prominent literary figures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, well acquainted with his work, seemed to have held Burns in high regard, William Wordsworth going as far as to consider him his teacher.

Burns may have been inspired by both his Scottish predecessors and other literary figures in English literature. However, the ploughman poet was also the maker of his own literary innovations, which began to distance his work from the Augustan tradition, and, most importantly, seemed to have had an impact on renowned Romantic poets, among them Wordsworth. While Burns's literary work may have not been as introspective and his treatment of nature as sublime as that of the English author, all evidence seems to point out at Burns as a major influence, which would entitle the ploughman poet to be considered, at least, as a precursor of Wordsworth, and by extension, of the Romantic movement in Britain. Had Burns been alive when *Lyrical Ballads* first saw the light, he might have been considered a participant in the Romanticism; had Burns been born south of the border, he would have, most likely, been spared from much of the debate which left the ploughman poet in no man's land.

Burns's literary work would certainly lend himself to a much broader future study from a post-colonial approach, considering the rather unique scenario of post-Union Scotland. While the most prevalent idea of Romanticism in the literary canons still seems to be that of a *monoglossic*, homogenous, Romantic movement, the concepts of hybridity and heteroglossia (worth looking into in much more detail) might, nevertheless, allow for the creation of new literary spaces receptive to accepting a more inclusive notion of Romanticism less susceptible to the constraints of time and place.

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